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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6615  
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7673  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1352  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 6388  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 3418  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1750  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6335  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 8036  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 8318  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 000997

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: TIGHT BATTLE IN RAJASTHAN

REF: A. BHARAT BALLOT SERIES

[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 470

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: While the race is close and tight in Rajasthan, the Congress Party is expected to pick up between 5-10 seats from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in parliamentary election. Polling was on May 7 and results will be declared on May 16. The Congress strategy was to pick strong candidates based on caste considerations and ride the momentum from its December 2008 win in the state assembly elections. The BJP sought to present a united face after quelling the infighting that it felt was responsible for its loss in December. Caste dominates all issues in Rajasthan elections. The state is an important battleground for both parties because any swing in seats is magnified due to the straight head-to-head nature of contests in this two-party state. End Summary.

Neck-to-Neck-Race

[1](#)2. (SBU) Poloff and PolFSN traveled to Rajasthan to assess the political climate in the state ahead of the May 7 parliamentary elections. Besides the urban centers of Jaipur, Jodhpur and Ajmer, Poloff and PolFSN visited the more remote and smaller townships of rural Rajasthan such as Pali, Khemsar, Nagaur and Sikar. Based on meetings with politicians, journalists, civic leaders and businessmen, it was clear the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were engaged in a tight fight. Results of the May 7 polls will be known on May 16 when votes are counted and results declared for all of India's 543 election districts.

[1](#)3. (SBU) A seat-by-seat analysis of Rajasthan's 25 constituencies with several politicians and journalists pointed to a split result: each national party was favored in nine districts; it was too close to call in five districts; and independent candidates were ahead in the remaining two districts. Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) could be a factor in tilting the race in one of two districts, but only because of the stature and funding of the BSP candidate in these districts and not because of any appeal that Mayawati or her party has in the state. The Communist Party of India

(CPM) could play a similar role in another seat, again because of the strong credentials of the candidate, not because of any communist leanings of the electorate.

¶4. (SBU) With the Congress holding only 4 of the 25 seats in the current parliament, it stands to gain 5-10 seats in the state depending on how many of the five close races it can clinch. This score card is in line with what we heard during our February visit to the state (ref b) before candidates had been selected and the campaigns have begun. The problem for the Congress Party is that as poll day approached, the races got tighter and some of its more secure races started becoming toss ups or at least tough battles.

¶5. (SBU) Post previously profiled Rajasthan (Ref B) as a two-party state with no third party posing any real challenge to the Congress Party and the BJP, which have in recent decades alternated in power in the state legislature. With a population of about 60 million, it is as large as Italy. Rajasthan is a poor or backward state in terms of development indicators, but has taken steps recently to break out of the "bimaru" (sick) tag.

#### Congress Strategy: Still Riding the Momentum

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¶6. (SBU) The Congress Party has devoted a great deal of attention to candidate selection, carefully balancing caste considerations with other compulsions, such as finding a district for young political star Sachin Pilot, who was displaced from his seat by redistricting, or forcing a

NEW DELHI 00000997 002 OF 004

Mumbai-based wealthy industrialist and funding source on a district despite the disadvantage of his outsider tag. The party hopes to continue riding the momentum from its December 2008 win in the state assembly elections. Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot has cautiously avoided any controversial decisions and continues to be a low-key but effective tactician.

#### BJP: Putting its House in Order

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¶7. (SBU) The BJP has put aside most of the infighting that contributed significantly to its defeat in December 2008. Former Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje continues to be the face of the party in the state but she has made peace with her adversaries in the party. Former Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat is quiet. Former Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh is fighting from West Bengal while his son is defending his Barmer seat in Rajasthan. Ghanshyam Tiwari has got the Jaipur seat he wanted and is inline for a ministerial post in Delhi should the BJP form the next government. With the squabbling over, the BJP is putting up a tough fight, knowing full well that it will lose ground from its 21-4 sweep of 2004 but trying to limit the damage.

#### No-Issue Campaign

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¶8. (SBU) One of the most pressing development issues in Rajasthan is water. The arid state suffers from a large shortfall of not only water for irrigation, but especially of drinking water. In Nagaur and Pali, we heard of long lines in the townships and villages waiting for the water tankers that the government provides every four to six days. The vernacular newspaper in Pali had on its front page the story about the government restarting a train which would make a daily water run to bring water by tanker cars from 200 kilometers away. Journalists in Nagaur spoke at length about the delayed plans to bring water via a 100 kilometer pipeline from an irrigation canal that feeds water from the Bhakra Dam in Punjab to the farmlands of northern Rajasthan. Despite the almost overriding importance of the water issue to daily life in Nagaur and Pali, local political experts did not

think it was an election issue. In their calculations, the caste affiliations of the candidates and caste-related machinations of their campaigns would determine the winners.

#### Caste is Everything

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¶9. (SBU) Vinod Modi, former BJP state legislator and unsuccessful aspirant for a Congress Party nomination for the parliamentary elections this time, told PolOff that the "caste factor" this year is more intense than any other time that he has witnessed. Former BJP Minister of Power Gajendra Singh agreed, noting that caste is becoming the central factor and increasingly the only factor in how people vote in the state. Every conversation about the polls had at its core a discussion of the caste alignments in the district and how the selection of candidates by both parties and their respective ground game was playing into these caste equations.

¶10. (SBU) The two principal caste-related political fault-lines in Rajasthan are Rajput vs. Jat and Gujjar vs. Meena. While the Rajputs are traditionally BJP-leaning, the Congress has queered the pitch by selecting three members of erstwhile Rajput royal families, which still invoke loyalty among the Rajput voters, to contest on its behalf. The Jats historically have sided with the Congress Party in the state but are now turning against it because of perceived anti-Jat sentiments of the party's chief minister in the state. The Gujjars tended to lean towards the Congress while the Meenas were more sympathetic to the BJP. The 2007-2008 unrest in

NEW DELHI 00000997 003 OF 004

the state over the Gujjar demands for affirmative action benefits similar to that enjoyed by the Meenas and the then-BJP state government's response to it has alienated the Meenas from the BJP but allowed the party to make some in-roads into the Gujjar vote.

¶11. (SBU) The traditional Rajput/Jat and Gujjar/Meena alignments, therefore, have been significantly disturbed just in time for the parliamentary election. A dozen other significant identity groups, among them Dalit, tribal, Muslim, Brahmin, Bishnoi and Vaishya, make the electoral dynamics of Rajasthan a complicated balancing act that parties have to navigate with careful candidate selections and a strong on-the-ground game.

#### Turning Out the Stars

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¶12. (SBU) Given the close races in Rajasthan, both parties rolled out their star campaigners. Rajasthan hosted Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi in the last week before polling day, each stopping off in different constituencies that were seeing close races. The BJP's national stars Prime Ministerial candidate L.K. Advani, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and state in-charge Venkaiah Naidu.

#### Muted Affair

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¶13. (SBU) In Rajasthan, as in many other states visited by Embassy New Delhi officers, there was little visible sign of campaigning and electioneering. We saw only scattered campaign-related bill boards in some of the urban centers. There were few flags or fliers or posters or loudspeaker-armed vehicles. The oppressive heat wave had no doubt contributed to the muted atmosphere but the Election Commission's expenditure limits have also played a part in muting what would have been in past cycles loud, colorful and boisterous campaigns. Security considerations and a heavy police presence made Jodhpur eerily quiet the day Prime Minister made a campaign stop in the city. His rally was disappointing and sparsely attended, according to one

interlocutor.

#### Weddings and the Heat Wave

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¶14. (SBU) Rajasthan was under a heat wave during the week of April 27, with temperatures touching 117 degrees Fahrenheit. Many of our interlocutors worried that the energy sapping temperatures have dampened campaigning and would affect voter turnout on game day. They also noted that the May 7 poll day coincidentally turned out to be an auspicious day for weddings by Hindu astrological charts. They expressed concern that thousands of weddings scheduled for that day would divert voter attention and result in low turnout. There was two directly opposite and equally firmly held views to who would benefit from lower turnout: the Congress, because it appeals to lower income groups who tend to vote in large numbers in India; and the BJP, because its voters are more disciplined and more committed to the party (Note: Actual statewide turnout in Rajasthan on May 7 was about 48 percent, slightly below the 50 percent as in the 2004 parliamentary election but significantly below the 68 percent recorded in the December 2008 state assembly elections.)

#### Voter Reticence

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¶15. (SBU) Several districts we visited happened coincidentally to be ones in which the race was close. We heard several journalists and analysts explain their uncertainty about the results by noting that the Rajasthani voter in recent

NEW DELHI 00000997 004 OF 004

election cycles has become notoriously close mouthed about his preferences. Two journalists told us separately that in their experience only 10 percent of those questioned about their intention will answer honestly, thus raising serious questions about opinion surveys. According to these journalists, voters increasingly believe they have nothing to gain by sharing their views and much to lose if they alienate someone by their answers, which they believe are never kept confidential.

#### Comment: Crucial State for Both Parties

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¶16. (SBU) For both the Congress Party and the BJP, Rajasthan is a crucial state because it appears to be the only sizeable state in which there could be a significant swing in seats between the two parties. The head-to-head battle in this two-party state makes any swing doubly important - a gain of five seats means a swing of ten seats. It is for this reason that Rajasthan saw an intense battle with the BJP fighting hard to limit its losses and the Congress seeing it as a ripe opportunity to make up for slippage elsewhere.

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